

DAI, WEI, M.M. Compositional Features in Wei Dai's Music (2014)
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This thesis presents my original musical composition, *Just One Thing*, a composition for flute, clarinet, violin, cello, percussion and piano. The piece was made through investigation of various possibilities arising from a one-measure musical idea. Furthermore, the resulting composition refers to rock, bossa nova and minimalist music, in a stylistic hybrid way that challenges performers to work together in a rhythmically complex environment. This composition can be viewed as a culminating statement of my musical work to date, as it combines my long background working in pop music with elements of concert music composition.

COMPOSITIONAL FEATURES IN WEI DAI'S MUSIC

by

Wei Dai

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Approved by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I
THE BACKGROUND OF *JUST ONE THING*

Music has never just come to find me, typically I have to go looking for it. But this time, the music found me while I was lying on the ground after I was hit by a car and flung into the driver's windshield last year. There was one measure in my ear that sounded (incompletely) like Steve Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians* in double time. I thought, "I really need to make that single measure into a piece. Otherwise, I will feel so sorry for myself for being hit by a car for no apparent reason."

I heard music at the moment, however, it was only one measure. Figure 1 below shows the rhythmic pattern of the initial idea and the programmatic materials that I selected for representing the events happened that night. Each material has a representative instrument or instruments. In Figure 2, I use abbreviations to show how those materials are changed along the initial idea later in the piece.




Programmatic Materials	Musical Materials	Representative Instrument(s)	Representative Symbols
Initial Idea		N/A	INI
The Hit Gesture	G-F-G-A	The cello and the left hand of the piano	HIT
Sound of Ambulance	Perfect fourth	The woodwinds	EMS
CT Machine	Shifting the block chords	The shaker	CT
Transportation: Driver's Car		The drum set	DRV
Transportation: Ambulance	Rolling the sixteenths	The vibraphone	AMB
Transportation: Medical Transfer Vehical		The wood blocks	MTV

Figure 1. Form of the Materials

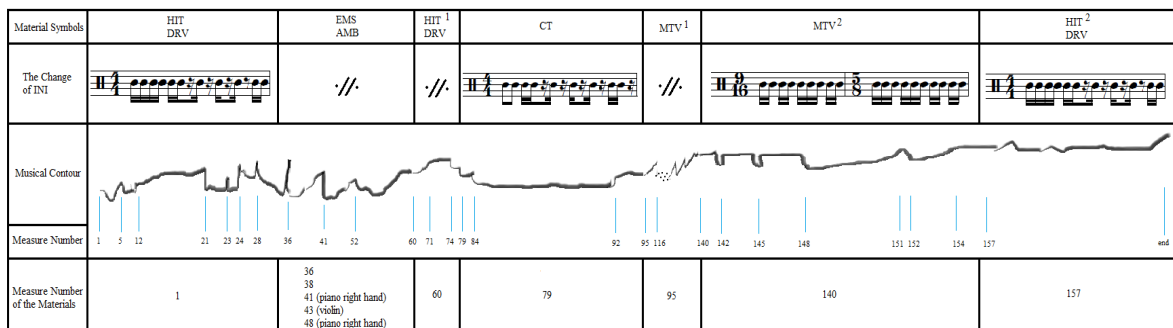


Figure 2. Structural Graph of *Just One Thing*

Figure 3 below shows the initial music that I heard while I was lying on the ground, and the four-measure opening that it became.

$\text{♩} = 100$

Flute

Clarinet in Bb
(doubling bass clarinet)

Violin

Cello

Drum Set

Percussion

Piano

Figure 3. The Initial Single Measure Idea.

CHAPTER II

JUST ONE THING

In order to represent in the piece some of the main impressions from the accident, I inserted several programmatic elements—the sound of an ambulance, several modes of transportation and the gloomy light of a computerized tomography (CT) machine.

In measure 36, the flute plays the “ambulance sound” which is comprised of a melodic perfect fourth (see Figure 4). The dotted quartet notes break the continuity of the rhythmic pattern and creates an alarm-like effect. Looking some measures ahead, there are two musical events that interfere with each other—the *tutti* sixteenth notes and the ambulance sound. The *tutti* is a transformation of the initial single measure idea, created by enlarging the intervallic space rather than staying on the same note in repetition. It results in a more complicated melodic line and a propulsive, driving energy.

The image displays a musical score for Measure 36, featuring the 'Ambulance Melody'. The score is written for several instruments: Flute (Fl.), B♭ Clarinet (B♭ Cl.), Violin (Vln.), Viola (Vc.), Percussion (Perc.), and Piano (Pno.). The melody is characterized by a series of eighth notes, primarily in the key of B-flat major. The score includes dynamic markings such as *f* (forte), *ff* (fortissimo), *mp* (mezzo-piano), and *subito p* (suddenly piano). The percussion part features a steady eighth-note rhythm. The piano part provides harmonic support with chords and arpeggiated figures. The overall texture is dense and expressive, capturing the emotional intensity of the 'Ambulance Melody'.

Figure 4. The “Ambulance Melody” in Measure 36.

Figure 5 shows the ambulance melody entering second time. In the first appearance, the clarinet is contrapuntally supported by the flute and the strings create structural harmony; the second time has the clarinet playing the “ambulance” melody while the piano’s outer voice doubles the same material. Also, the harmony changes from a major seventh chord in the first appearance to a minor seventh chord the second time. The effect is intended to be beautifully sad.



Figure 5. The “Ambulance Melody” in Measures 38–39.

As mentioned above, the piece is started with a single measure that expands into a four-measure musical statement. In order to emphasize the various modes transportation experienced that horrible night, I additionally placed the drum set in this short opening, as well as in other important places in the piece. Drum set is thus used to symbolize all of the transportation that night, and it becomes the driving engine of the developing piece. For instance, in the beginning four measures, I used the hi-hat and cymbal to represent the driver’s automobile. I want to create a perception that this event happened suddenly with no warning or preparation. The bass line G–F–G–A draws a gesture of tumbling off from the windshield to the ground and rolling up to the lawn.

In measure 62 where the theme first reprises, the drum set progresses dynamically from soft to loud and rhythmically moves from sparse to dense. It is intended to depict

me lying inside an ambulance, getting more and more nervous on the way to the emergency room.

Figure 6. First Reprise, Measures 62–65.

I also attempt to present an image of me lying on a transportable bed and being pushed to the CT examination room, where there was gloomy light and a creepy sound coming from the CT machine. For example, in measure 74 where the drummer moves to a shaker, there are two similar rhythmic patterns progressing simultaneously. From measure 71 to measure 74, I add one more rhythmic layer in woodwind and string family against the pattern in the piano. Compared to the piano, the new layer has only one slight difference at the end of the measure. Later, as shown in Figure 7, the new layer takes over

as predominant, while there are more rhythmic rests in the piano's pattern. The outer voices' line of those block chords is meant to create a sound similar to clicking a camera shutter, which evokes the moving light in the sensor of the CT machine. Thus, the section transfers from one aural perception to another without leaving an obvious gap. At the same time, the percussionist plays regular eighth notes with the shaker, while providing irregular accents with the snare and kick.

The image displays a musical score for measures 74 through 77. The score is arranged in six staves, each with a label to its left: Fl. (Flute), B♭ Cl. (B♭ Clarinet), Vln. (Violin), Vc. (Viola), Perc. (Percussion), and Pno. (Piano). The Flute, B♭ Clarinet, Violin, and Viola staves begin with a forte (*f*) dynamic and a series of sixteenth-note runs. At measure 75, each of these staves has a *subito p* (suddenly piano) marking, after which the music transitions to a more static, block-chord-like texture. The Violin and Viola staves also have a *pizz.* (pizzicato) marking at measure 75. The Percussion staff features a steady eighth-note pattern on the shaker, with snare and kick drum accents. A text annotation 'Muta Hihat in shaker.' is placed above the Percussion staff at measure 75. The Piano staff begins with a forte (*f*) dynamic and a complex, rhythmic pattern of chords and single notes, which also transitions to a more static texture at measure 75, marked by a *subito p* dynamic change.

Figure 7. Measures 74–77.

From measure 149, the drum set gradually prepares the arrival of the second reprise, which is in measure 157 (see Figure 8). This time, the rhythm of the drum set is

more dense and compulsive, which is meant to symbolize that I was taken back to my apartment in a policeman's car and also draws the piece to an emotional conclusion.

The image displays a musical score for measures 157 through 159, identified as the Second Reprise. The score is arranged in six staves, each labeled with an instrument: Fl. (Flute), B♭ Cl. (B-flat Clarinet), Vln. (Violin), Vc. (Violoncello), Perc. (Percussion), and Pno. (Piano). The Flute and B-flat Clarinet parts begin with a dynamic marking of *f* and feature a crescendo to *ff* in measure 158 before returning to *f* in measure 159. The Violin part starts at measure 157 with a *f* dynamic and includes the instruction "under melody". The Violoncello part also begins at measure 157 with a *f* dynamic. The Percussion part starts at measure 157 with a *f* dynamic and maintains a consistent rhythmic pattern. The Piano part begins at measure 157 with a *f* dynamic and features a complex, dense texture with many beamed sixteenth notes. The overall musical texture is highly complex and dense, reflecting the "compulsive" nature described in the text.

Figure 8. Second Reprise, Measure 157.

CHAPTER III

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF MY MUSIC

In my compositions, I try to create a commercially approachable serious music and to give works of “art music” the appearance of pop music. Generally speaking, there are three main features in my composition—melodic fluency, harmonic progressions drawn from pop music’s vocabulary, and investigating multiple ways of developing musical statements.

Because I have been writing pop music since I was 10, I always focus on whether the melody is approachable enough for many listeners. And what results in my concert music is that my compositional conception is based mostly on horizontal thoughts, which means I compose the melody first, then the harmony and orchestration. In this way, I can get a strong melody, and also be able to complicate the texture if necessary.

I often use harmonic progressions from pop music in my concert music writing. For example, we can easily find a stepwise motion in the bass in pop music. The verse and chorus of my composition *Role*, shown in Example 1 below, illustrates this stepwise motion bass line, which follows scale degrees 1-7-6-5-4-3-2.



Example 1. *Role*.¹

Later in 2013, I use this bass motion in *Float with the Wind* (see Example 4). The cello plays a descending line in half-steps: 1-7- b7-6- b6-5.



Example 2. *Sleepwalking in The Pearl River*.²

Example 2 represents another harmonic feature in my music, that of using a common tone to realize a distant modulation. I will sustain the root of a C Major chord in the melody while the supporting harmony is shifted from C Major to A-flat Major. I am attracted to this type of chromatic median chord shift that generates a dreamlike space. Later, this character fully developed in the harmonic progression of *Steamed Rice*.



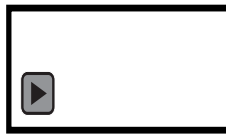
Example 3. *Steamed Rice*.³

¹ Dai, Wei. 2010. Pop song: *Role*. Performed and produced by Wei Dai.

² Dai, Wei. 2012. *Sleepwalking in The Pearl River*, for chamber orchestra and produced by with Cubase.

³ Dai, Wei. 2013. *Steamed Rice*, written for piano and voice. Voice performed by Wei Dai.

My development of material often includes the overlapping and interruption of different musical events. Those events are sometimes derived or transformed from some initial motive. For instance, as mentioned above regarding measure 74 (Figure 7) in *Just One Thing*, those two similar events come from the same source yet go to different directions later. This is similar to two beams of light that silently encounter, interfere with each other, form a pattern, then separate apart. Also in Example 4 below, the 6/8 event is interfered by the note repetition directly.



Example 4. *Float with the Wind*.⁴

My compositions that involve a vocal part seek a variety of different singing techniques and style. In Example 5, I add pop, Tibetan folk, and also a small amount of soul music elements to the vocal part. These compositions often require the singer to use different resonance positions flexibly, and to use falsetto singing that generates an airy sound and illusory effect.

⁴ Dai, Wei. *Float with the Wind*, is written for three clarinets, cello and voice. Performed by Graham Dart, Michael Bretton, Kwami Barnett, Charlie Rasmussen and Wei Dai in UNCG Student Composers Concert in Spring 2013.



Example 5. *If I'm Lost-Now*⁵.

These elements cross over genre lines. We realize that in music, a small detail might serve to blur the lines between genres. And this serious kind of blurring has been utilized in my composition, which seems to strike a chord among listeners coming from disparate musical backgrounds.

⁵ Dai, Wei. *If I'm Lost-Now*, is written for alto saxophone, baritone saxophone, voice and digital media. Recorded by Xin Gao, Steve Stusek and Wei Dai.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

In *Just One Thing*, I sought to capture a response to a real and terrifying experience, projecting it in a musical environment that was at one time related to those events, and also consistent with my own musical composition style. The piece uses many of the cross-genre elements I have described above, being based on pop grooves, harmony and phrasing, while seeking structural and technical diversity more common in concert music. I hope not to again experience such an event where music is compelled to find me, but if it does find me, I will seek to develop it in deeper, more skillful ways. Having found, and articulated, the way my pop background infuses and informs my concert music composition, I hope to capitalize on this realization to continue to make music of lasting value, and that continues to have strong surface appeal.

APPENDIX A
SCORE OF *JUST ONE THING*

for sextet

Spring 2014

♩ = 100

This musical score is for the song "The Sound of Silence" by Simon & Garfunkel. It is a 4/4 piece in the key of D major. The score includes parts for Flute, Clarinet in B \flat (doubling bass clarinet), Violin, Cello, Drum Set, Percussion, and Piano. The tempo is marked "Moderato". The score is divided into three measures, each lasting 4 bars. The Flute part starts with a rest in the first measure, followed by a series of eighth notes in the second and third measures. The Clarinet in B \flat part starts with a rest in the first measure, followed by a series of eighth notes in the second and third measures. The Violin part starts with a rest in the first measure, followed by a series of eighth notes in the second and third measures. The Cello part starts with a rest in the first measure, followed by a series of eighth notes in the second and third measures. The Drum Set part starts with a rest in the first measure, followed by a series of eighth notes in the second and third measures. The Percussion part starts with a rest in the first measure, followed by a series of eighth notes in the second and third measures. The Piano part starts with a rest in the first measure, followed by a series of eighth notes in the second and third measures. The score is written for a full orchestra, with the Flute and Clarinet in B \flat parts being the most prominent.

[illegible]

8

Fl.

B♭ Cl.

Vln.

Vc.

Pno.

p \swarrow *f*

p \swarrow *f*

p \swarrow *f*

p

11

Fl.

B♭ Cl.

Vln.

Vc.

Pno.

p \swarrow *fp* \swarrow

p \swarrow *f* \swarrow *ff*

p \swarrow *f* \swarrow *ff*

f

f

B

Musical score for measures 14-24, featuring Flute (Fl.), B♭ Clarinet (B♭ Cl.), Violin (Vln.), Viola (Vc.), Piano (Pno.), and Percussion (Perc.).

Measures 14-16: Flute and B♭ Clarinet play a melodic line with accents. Violin and Viola play a rhythmic pattern. Piano plays a complex accompaniment with *mf* and *f* dynamics.

Measures 17-24: Flute and B♭ Clarinet play a melodic line with accents. Violin and Viola play a rhythmic pattern. Piano plays a complex accompaniment with *f* and *pp* dynamics. Percussion plays a rhythmic pattern.

Measures 25-27: Flute and B♭ Clarinet play a melodic line with accents. Violin and Viola play a rhythmic pattern. Piano plays a complex accompaniment with *f* and *pp* dynamics. Percussion plays a rhythmic pattern.

20

Fl. *pp* *f*

B♭ Cl. *pp* *f*

Vln. *pp* *f*

Vc. *p* *f*

Perc. *pp* *p* *pp* *f*

Pno. *pp* *f*

Vibraphone

solo esp.

24

Fl. *pp*

B♭ Cl. *pp*

Vln. *pp*

Vc. *p* *p*

Perc. *pp*

Pno. *pp* *mf*

reg.

34

Fl.

B♭ Cl.

Vln.

Vc.

Perc.

Pno.

f *ff* *mp*

ff *subito p*

ff *ff*

37

Fl.

B♭ Cl.

Vln.

Vc.

Perc.

Pno.

f *p*

f *f* *p*

40

Fl.

B \flat Cl.

Vln.

Vc.

Perc.

Pno.

pp

p

8va

D

Fl.

B \flat Cl.

Vln.

Vc.

Perc.

Pno.

p

p

p

43

46

Fl.

B♭ Cl.

Vln.

Vc.

Perc.

Pno.

f

fp

p

p

49

Fl.

B♭ Cl.

Vln.

Vc.

Perc.

Pno.

3

52 *duo esp.*

Fl. *p*

B♭ Cl. *p*

Vln. *ppp* *pp* *p*

Vc. *ppp* *pp* *p*

Perc. *pp*

Pno. *pp* *ppp* *ppp* *pp* *p* *p*

E

57

Fl. *mp* *mf* *f*

B♭ Cl. *f*

Vln. *pp* *fp*

Vc. *pp* *fp*

Perc. *pp* *fp*

Pno. *mp* *f*

61

Fl.

B \flat Cl.

Vln.

Vc.

Perc.

Pno.

f

fp \leftarrow *f*

mf

f

fp \leftarrow *f*

mf

under melody

f

D.S.

f

p

f

mf

65

Fl.

B \flat Cl.

Vln.

Vc.

Perc.

Pno.

f

f

f

f

f

mf

f

Accent shift

[illegible]

74

Fl. *f* *subito p*

B♭ Cl. *f* *subito p*

Vln. *f* *pizz.* *subito p*

Vc. *f* *pizz.* *subito p*

Perc. 74 Muta Hihat in shaker. *subito p*

Pno. *f* *subito p*

77

Fl. *p* *vanished*

B♭ Cl. *p*

Vln. *p*

Vc. *p*

Perc. 77 *p*

Pno. *vanished*

F

81

Fl.

B \flat Cl.

Vln.

Vc.

Perc.

Pno.

Muta shaker in Hihat.

closed

open

mp

mp

mp

p \longrightarrow *mf*

mf

85

Fl.

B \flat Cl.

Bass. Cl.

Vln.

Vc.

Perc.

Pno.

89 G

Fl.

B \flat Cl.

Bass. Cl. *Ossia 8va*

Vln.

Vc.

Perc. *closed* \rightarrow *open*

p \rightarrow *mf*

Pno.

93

Fl.

B \flat Cl.

Bass. Cl.

Vln.

Vc.

Perc. *Woodblocks*

f

Pno.

96

Fl.

B♭ Cl.

Bass. Cl.

Vln.

Vc.

Perc.

Pno.

f

H

99

Fl.

B♭ Cl.

Bass. Cl.

Vln.

Vc.

Perc.

Pno.

arco

pppp

p

mf

102

Fl.

Bass. Cl.

Vln.

Vc.

arco

pppp *p*

Perc.

Pno.

105

Fl.

Bass. Cl.

Vln.

Vc.

Perc.

Pno.

ppp *p*

114

Fl.

Bass. Cl.

Vln.

Vc.

Perc.

Pno.

p

117

Fl.

B♭ Cl.

Vln.

Vc.

J

p

pp *mp*

117

Perc.

Vib.

Pno.

W.B.

p

pp

f

121

Fl. *pp* *mp* *pp* *mf*

B♭ Cl. *pp* *mp*

Vln. *pp* *mp*

Vc. *pp*

Perc.

Pno. *p* *f* *p* *f*

124

Fl. *pp* *mp* *ppp* *p*

B♭ Cl. *pp* *mp* *ppp* *p*

Vln. *pp* *mp* *ppp*

Vc. *mp* *pp* *p*

Perc.

Pno. *p* *p* *p* *f* *f* *f*

Detailed description of the musical score: The score is for a chamber ensemble. The first system (measures 121-123) features a Flute part with rapid sixteenth-note passages, a B♭ Clarinet part with similar rhythmic patterns, and a Violin part with sustained notes. The Viola part has a single note in measure 123. The Percussion part has a steady eighth-note pattern. The Piano part has a complex rhythmic pattern with accents. The second system (measures 124-126) continues the Flute and B♭ Clarinet parts with more complex rhythmic patterns. The Violin part has a sustained note in measure 124 and a new pattern in measure 125. The Viola part has a sustained note in measure 124 and a new pattern in measure 125. The Percussion part has a steady eighth-note pattern. The Piano part has a complex rhythmic pattern with accents.

127

Fl. *ppp* *pp* *p* *mp* *ppp* *p* *p* *mp*

B♭ Cl. *pp* *p* *mp* *ppp* *p* *p* *mp*

Vln. *p* *pp* *duo esp.* *p*

Vc. *ppp* *p* *duo esp.* *p*

Perc. *pp* *ppp* *p*

Pno. *p* *f*

131

Fl. *p* *mp* *mf*

B♭ Cl. *p* *mp* *mf*

Vln. *p* *mp* *mf*

Vc. *mp* *mf*

Perc. *mp* *fp*

Pno. *mp*

135

Fl. *p* *mp*

B♭ Cl. *p* *pp*

Vln. *p* *pp*

Vc. *p* *mp*

Perc. *p* *mp* *pp*

Pno. *p* *f*

137

Fl. *pp* *p* *pp*

B♭ Cl. *mp* *pp* *pp* *mp*

Bass. Cl. *pp* *p* *pp*

Vln. *mp* *pp* *mp*

Vc. *pp* *p* *pp*

Perc. *mp* *pp* *mp*

Pno. *p* *f* *p*

9/16 9/16 9/16 9/16 9/16 9/16 9/16 9/16 9/16 9/16

148

Fl. *p* *f*

B♭ Cl. *p* *f*

Vln. *p* *f*

Vc. *p* *f*

Perc. *p* *f* closed D.S. → open

Pno. *p* *f*

151

Fl. *ff* *mp* *p*

B♭ Cl. *ff* *p*

Vln. *ff* *mp*

Vc. *ff* solo (fill) *p*

Perc. *ff* *p*

Pno. *ff*

Measures 154-157 of the musical score. The instruments and their parts are:

- Flute (Fl.):** Measures 154-157. Starts with a rest, then plays a melodic line with accents. Measure 156 has a forte (*f*) dynamic. Measure 157 has a forte (*f*) dynamic and a "L" marking above the staff.
- B♭ Clarinet (B♭ Cl.):** Measures 154-157. Starts with a rest, then plays a melodic line with accents. Measure 156 has a forte (*f*) dynamic. Measure 157 has a forte (*f*) dynamic and a "L" marking above the staff.
- Violin (Vln.):** Measures 154-157. Starts with a rest, then plays a melodic line with accents. Measure 156 has a forte (*f*) dynamic. Measure 157 has a forte (*f*) dynamic and a "L" marking above the staff.
- Viola (Vc.):** Measures 154-157. Starts with a rest, then plays a melodic line with accents. Measure 156 has a forte (*f*) dynamic. Measure 157 has a forte (*f*) dynamic and a "L" marking above the staff.
- Percussion (Perc.):** Measures 154-157. Plays a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. Measure 156 has a forte (*f*) dynamic. Measure 157 has a forte (*f*) dynamic.
- Piano (Pno.):** Measures 154-157. Starts with a rest, then plays a melodic line with accents. Measure 156 has a forte (*f*) dynamic. Measure 157 has a forte (*f*) dynamic and a "L" marking above the staff.

This section of the score covers measures 161 through 164. Measures 161 and 162 are in 4/4 time, while measures 163 and 164 are in 2/4 time. A box labeled "Accent shift" spans measures 162 and 163. The instrumentation includes Flute (Fl.), B♭ Clarinet (B♭ Cl.), Violin (Vln.), Viola (Vc.), Percussion (Perc.), Piano (Pno.), and a second Flute (Fl.). The score features various dynamics such as *mp* (mezzo-piano), *f* (forte), and *ff* (fortissimo). The piano part includes a circled chord in measure 162. The percussion part shows a rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes. The woodwinds and strings play melodic and harmonic lines, with the strings becoming more active in the 2/4 section.